

BUT WASN'T IT GOOD WHILE IT LASTED?

BY R. LOUIS RICHARDS

I have long considered Irene and Kent Martin to be my friends. I've too often been on the receiving end of their generosity to feel otherwise. Whereas my argumentativeness may be the negative balance for my honesty, and my cache of facts and opinions may be to some degree errant, I hope I can make a few statements without endangering our friendly rapport. It is as just another human trying to get by on the same Earth that I offer this as work, hopefully, toward understanding.

I was reading Irene's article in the May 1995 issue of the Times Eagle (*Work Is Our Joy*) when I started scratching out a few reactive notes. Admittedly, the quotes I pull up may be out of context. I hope I haven't misunderstood any of her intention. I deeply respect and appreciate both the quality thinking and the sincerity she invested in her writing.

The idea of "frontier" that she takes up from a 1991 Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) article she quoted, says more to me about the conquest psychology of an empire culture than the reality of a necessity to find lifestyles contained within the natural balance. The last widespread application of such a balanced lifestyle fell victim to the outreach of what was a generally global conquest. Part of the conqueror's plunder was/is the controlling of the mindset of the conquered.

She states, "The shift in terminology from such words as fishing, farming, and logging, to 'extractive' industries carries a negative moral weight, which in turn justifies the turning over of resources to the morally superior non-extractive users." This may or may not be true. When we feel attacked or threatened, we can get defensive and look for fault in the alternatives. Any new course should be carefully considered, but preferably when the fearful or painful emotions have been dealt with. I believe we each want what is best for us all.

In my usage, the term "resource extraction" would not be meant to debase anyone's humanity or moral standing. To me it is simply, and precisely, the definitive term for what fishing, whaling, logging, mining, and any forms of manufacturing or agriculture requiring the import/export of resources (air, chemical, energy, species, and/or water) actually are. A spade is a spade. Extractive is extractive. If a grizzly bear threw a plastic net in the river and sold salmon, it would qualify as extractive. Our mining of the very finite supply of virgin forests has always been extractive. There has never been anything renewable about the exchange of plantations for biota.

It is certainly not my intention here to say that some form of top down enforcement would be the right choice. The contextual predicament seems far beyond any definable position's present means. We have little time to do what is right and necessary, and perceivably a better chance of winning the lotto. It may be the most we can hope for just to have given it our best shot because we cared enough to try.

Morals would enter the equation only when we have realized and understood that there are negative implications in our actions and we consciously choose personal gain over a recognized greater good. Unwise behavior due to ignorance, or to a denial symptomatic of psychological illness, is to be expected and empathized with under our current conditions. Today, as a culture, we are no less than any other addicted organism. We could all easily die from our condition. This is very possible and in the view of Dr. Bob, the prognosis is doubtful. He doesn't feel he has the time or luxury of a comforting bedside manner.

We go on to ask, "Is there not a disturbing echo here of how the original frontier was created by means of a land grab from the aboriginal inhabitants of North America. Must frontier creation always involve a wresting away of resources from one owner/user by another?" Yes is what I would say in recognition of the nature of the conquering empire. The aboriginal inhabitants were not 'owners' or 'users' of a 'frontier' or 'resources'. To said aboriginals these forms and ideas were completely foreign. They were simply part of the life of the Earth and are blameless of any result arising from their having been invaded.

We cannot separate the case of the salmon's decline from the kaleidoscopic context of the empire culture. We exist here in a last little back corner of the continental United States, part of a constitutional republic protracted some time ago from British common law. We are tied by law and economy to the world of empire. Some say we can't go back. This, fellow lemmings, may well be true. We do have the capabilities of superior lemmings, should we choose to use them. Our progress toward the great leap is being covered, live, by the Goodyear blimp. We can tune in at 11 and listen to discussions of what the movement of the herd really means. Is it a cliff or just a virtual cliff? Amazingly, the pros and cons of running *en masse* toward some kind of precipice are being debated right this moment as we continue our run.

Yes, I agree. We must understand the economic and theological aspects of the social question. Chapter one of the Bible commands the Judeo-Christian Empire that this oft translated and variously interpreted book so strongly influences, to subdue the Earth and dominate it. This is no less than the conceptual codification of the empire, serving its prototypical emperor, the dominator god.

We are asked: "Must a pro-environmental stand eliminate all human considerations?" The very question shows that the full context is not seen.

It is stated: "There was a time when the Judeo-Christian tradition was the undergirding of a nation's philosophy of taming the frontier." Was the state in which the invaders found this continent so terrible?

"How does the society choose to sacrifice one ethic for another?" I don't know, I guess it just does, providing it's not too late. Didn't General Sheridan order the destruction of the buffalo in order to eliminate and replace a long proven and functioning Earth-centered ethic, seen as no ethic at all by the blessed barbarians?

Don't expect the defenders of the Earth, battling the empire, to act entirely politely when they perceive us to be in an emergency situation. Once "pirates" used cannons. Now maybe they use 25-mile pieces of clear plastic web. Few are out there to catch fish as to net living gold. How much of their nearly eternal webbing now sits on the bottom beyond the continental shelf, fishing on forever? What if an industry generated invisible



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suffocating snares capable of being lost along our children's route to school? If there was enough money in it, do you suppose it would be okay? Am I being an alarmist? Why have I found so many lost nets along the river over the years? Because they were discarded or got away from someone, obviously.

The dangerous truth is we can't live without fish to eat. Living as I do (*conservatively*) I have long been priced out of the market for salmon. This planet's destruction is not about our living. It's about our living higher on the hog. Maybe the time has come to question our moral bases. And what, precisely, are the standards we think of as "just getting by?"

I don't want the "dehumanization of loggers." I want the "deloggerization of humans." Aren't humans reputed to be the most adaptive species on Earth after the cockroach? So, ultimately, this is all simply a question of our choices of identity, isn't it. Richard Bach said in his book *Illusions*, "Argue for your limitations, and sure enough they're yours."

This is not a question of who is to blame so much as what is to blame. And what is to blame is our socio-religious software, our cultural operating programs. When we get a message indicating danger we must stay mentally cognizant, fight off our programmed tendency toward denial, and try to embrace what we have learned.

Be it lemmings off the cliff or the Apocalypse, we are without a doubt, accelerating the *decrease* of the life and health of this planet by our actions. Armageddon is *not* a done deal. God is not to blame. We don't own God though we each own a human's conceptual description of Her. We are each responsible for what comes out of what we choose to believe. Call it free agency. We are affecting all life, personally and culturally, in our own home and across the whole globe.

The Columbia River. I imagine it once had as many names as the various nations it easily supported. What once spread down and around out of the Canadian Rockies like a giant cornucopia is now sick and tiring. I would not find it surprising to learn that the earliest Euro-barbarian explorers to cross the bar on a calm high slack tide could look down from their gunwales through clear crystal and see the corrugated sandy bottom with shoals of fish, flying over it through liquid air.

Dams have slammed shut over the thresholds of the legendary June Hogs' homes. The biggest and best, first to decline, now disappeared. The waters slow to a near stop and turn to the particulate green of southern rivers traversing flat deserts.

Poisons, invisible, black, orange and white, pour down from mills, mines, smelters, and radioactive tailings and waste dumps, to find their lowest levels in the absolute desecration of glaciers and forests' patiently created purity.

Throughout Columbia's drainage cattle piss and shit in every tiny tributary that they can't possibly reach. They trample down the banks and much of what they don't eat as they unconsciously race to our Sunday barbecues and fastfood slums. Cultured by the mind-craft of the moneyed classes, we and our children see it as the natural way to be. *Bon Appetit*.

Whole provinces and states of shaved hills and mountains replace what were once called watersheds so we can have phone books, newspapers, napkins and the rest. I have seen a 6x3 foot satellite photo of British Columbia's motheaten Crown Forests. Don't assume they will be outdone by the Yanks. The Chinese, even before the Bible, had embraced the cadence of empire and stripped their own forests, laying down hundreds of feet of silt in their river valleys. They now invest in papermills in British Columbia that scrape the trees from whole watersheds. Meanwhile, Canadian copper mining interests lobby to subvert longstanding water quality legal standards in the Cascades, as South African and Dutch corporations spray water mixed with cyanide on ground-up portions of Eastern Oregon to leach out any traces of gold.

Disease plagues our mother river. Near the town of Boundary, Washington, where the Columbia crosses in from Canada, residents on the river suffer an inordinate level of intestinal disorders. Only a few miles north of the border, heavy metals and uranium have been entering the water for over half a century.

The stretch of choppy water near the Dalles, Oregon, draws thousands of windsurfers from all over the world. Many have complained of various elements, and many no longer go there for the great wind conditions just 120 miles downstream from the Hanford Nuclear Reservation.

The south shore of Puget Island, Washington, known as Sunny Sands, faces the ship channel. It's a handy place to pump dredge spoils. This was a great thing for everyone. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers got rid of the deep channel sand. International commerce prospered. The home owners got their

backyards and beaches vastly expanded. Their kids didn't have to play out in the road in front. But their kids get leukemia in every second household.

People thought I was being unreasonable because I would not compromise about a few dollars as I opposed every increase in the basic rate of electrical supply. I insisted that morally only the use rate should be increased. Using an old refrigerator outside of my wood heated space on the north side of my cabin, a few lights, a solid state radio and the occasional power tool, my usage of electricity was limited to what could do best for me. After three years without any electrical service, my consumption was under 1000 kilowatt hours per year, or about equal to the continuous use of one 100 watt bulb. Paying only the basic charge, which often exceeded my usage, in about fifteen years my charges went from \$18 per year to almost \$120. In this system of negative feedback I was punished for conserving electrical power and not tripping up the salmon.

Yeah, I still use electricity, paper, food and gas. I too am a prisoner of the empire context. Many of my lifestyle decisions have been based on environmental considerations with no hope of monetary compensation. Besides no longer eating meat or salmon, cars, fuel and insurance are now beyond my ability to pay. My 'net' monetary worth (no pun intended) could not come close to the value of a modern gillnet boat with its mechanized high-tech gear and fuel guzzling engine. I've been called in the pejorative by some professional resource extractors a "preservationist." Thank you. If I were to characterize those too greedy to change course, I'd call them "mercenaries in the war against Nature" and think I was describing them quite accurately.

We talk of blaming victims when I can go to the local store and buy a "Campbell's Cream of Spotted Owl Soup" T-shirt or cap. I've heard no one casting such aspersions toward the salmon which has its respect based on an economic standing to which the lowly and "useless" owl can make no such claim.

Sportsmen (so-called) condemn the netters. Are those who hook and engage an innocent and unwilling opponent in a life or death struggle, just for the fun of it, the more moral? I've worked the fish commercially, both hook and net. I also "played" many a fish for my personal pleasure. I did this for many years without ever a question that I would cop to at the time. Such was my cultural programming. If I said I'd never felt the twinge of conscience, I'd be lying.

I've cut down my share of trees and even had a sawmill. I've picked oysters, raked clams, stolen Douglas fir cones from the squirrels that worked so hard to cut them. I've secretly broken international law under orders in the military. I've hunted and farmed for subsistence. For my ego and a rush of excitement I've wastefully raced cars. We all do what we've got to do. Just when it will be that we start knowing and dealing with the implications of our actions is to each of us our personal question.

Our communities are communities of self-interest. I think Bill Gunderson's observations are indicative of what the "subdue the Earth" empire ethic does when it reaches the end of its blessed subduing. He said, "It's sort of barbaric." Yes it is. Must we buy the biggest engine and pour in the most fuel to be the first boat to the drift? Are we all out for corkin' each other at the trough? We have been programmed to our appetites for fine homes, green lawns, energy, wood products, metals, meat, fish, and most of all more money. It seems there is never enough money.

We're asked, "What happens when the fishing communities change into retirement communities and resort towns, sending the price of waterfront property so high that fishing families must relocate?" Nice while it lasted, wasn't it? Sucks for most all of us though, doesn't it? What happens? I don't know, maybe we cash in our highly appreciated real estate and contribute the capital gains to the Earth First!ers who have put their bodies on the line, been beaten up, bombed, burned out, murdered, had their pets killed, and have gone to jail for us all, in spite of us, with no pay, and who intend their sacrifices only for the greater good. You can't buy 'em, these eco-defenders. Maybe we don't like what they do, but you've got to give 'em some credit.

So the official word is that we need diversity in our culture. How can we have cultural diversity when we all seek the same power, that of *The Economy of Empire* that is working its damage worldwide? It is the economy that will dredge the channel for deeper draft ships, pumping the heavy metals and radioactive sands up on the shores and islands. It is the economy that will bleach its paper whiter with dioxins, making the ocean dwelling salmon only the least carcinogenic of the fish in the Columbia. It is the economy that will develop the waterfronts for profit. And who says that El Niño is a "natural" disaster? It is the result of equatorial warming, which is driving polar cooling, which is driving the heat engine of our stronger and stronger storms. Not proven? Okay, everything is A-okay. Forget I said it, have a drink. It's time for Rush, turn on the TV. We must evolve or perish.

I just called Okie's Store and received a quoted retail price for Chinook salmon today in Naselle, Washington, at \$5 a pound. Clear vertical grain (old growth) Douglas fir presently at the yard in Astoria is \$5.85 per board foot. Curiously, it's roughly the same price by weight, the fir costing just slightly more.

While several species of salmon teeter on the very edge of eternity and many of the remaining big firs are "harvested" under the latest canard of "salvage logging," the very rich, in their hotels and mansions of clear grained Douglas fir, will still dine on Chinook salmon. When no legal form of reaping these lifeforms still remains, a black market will arise from the dark depths of their deep pockets. All the while, just as Chief Seattle said, his people's spirits, unseen, will silently walk amongst us.

Like any finite 'resource' on the verge of elimination, the salmon like the old growth trees before them took off on a steep curve up the dollar graph. As the big trees' and salmon's value jumped the moneyed middlemen were quick to carve out a bigger slice of the pie for themselves. Fewer fishermen and fewer loggers were needed to provide the hard dirty sweaty labor. They were played off against each other for the dwindling jobs, held loyal to the industry by no more than a good living wage at the most.

Work was their joy.

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